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ABSTRACT

Three game approaches to the teaching of poetry, designed to make the student actively involved with poems are described as "teaching tools." The semantico-dictionary or word-cross game involves programing techniques, logic, and lexicography in poetic analysis. The punched-out poem game involves filling in the blanks of a poem in which all the words supplied act as cues. The poem-paradigm game used traditional sentence outlining to show how sub-parts are interrelated. Byron's poem "She Walks in Beauty" is used as the example for all three games. The influence of Wittgenstein, Descartes, and I.A. Richards is briefly discussed as well as the Cloze procedure in game theory. (AF)

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POETRY-TEACHING TOOLS

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John J. Murray

After Wittgenstein no literary theorist can afford to ignore the theory of games. No theory of poetry can ever get off the ground unless certain assumptions, ground rules, or basic agreements among the players become a part of an axiom system. Until that day dawns when an adequate definition of poetry is formulated, it is best to consider it an elaborate game (I leave the question open whether it is serious or non-serious). One thing it definitely is: a sub-classification of the more general game we all play, the language game.

Now in that prototype of college classroom laboratories, the one described in James Thurber's "University Days," the biology instructor vowed to teach Thurber to see cells "by every adjustment of the microscope known to man." Contrariwise, Wittgenstein tells us that if we are ever to "see" we must take off our spectacles. Who are we to believe, Thurber's harrassed biology instructor or Wittgenstein?

I believe every English teacher's fondest dream is to be able to teach a way of seeing a poem "by every adjustment of the microscope known to man." This means *every adjustment*; and a further stipulation: the microscope's lenses must be nearly as powerful as Mount Palomar's.

What are some of these adjustments? Well, for one thing we could insist on a better understanding of language itself. Students coming to a poem for the first time, say about the fifth grade, should, in theory at least, know the rules of sentence structure. They should have a pragmatic grasp of those rules which enable them to decode a message sent to them by another. They already have much of the necessary built-in mechanisms: (1) an ability to associate; (2) a semantic capability (though quite elementary); (3) a categorical skill that helps them to place nouns and verbs in their right slots; (4) a natural logic that helps them to see, at the least, that non-syntactical constructions just don't belong.

How are we to take advantage of these natural abilities? Well, there are many games we can play. There is, for instance,

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the most elementary of all, the one which St. Augustine describes as the way everybody learns to speak. Simply put, this would be the game of "This is an X." After saying "This is a ____," the teacher then points to the object or draws a picture on the blackboard. It is the device used by I. A. Richards and his associates in the picture-books which show "how to" read a foreign language. Of what use is this game in the teaching of a poem? Scoffers will say, "This is too elementary. If I were to point to a poem, even a very difficult poem, and announce 'This is a poem,' wouldn't I be acting quite moronically?". You would. But once you accept the notion that poetry is a system of rules to be carried out in an operation, you must also accept the notion that an entirely new perspective in thinking is required, a perspective that amounts to an 180° turn of back azimuth. Like the programmer working up steps to be fed into an electronic computer, you must consider yourself as one who breaks everything down into a series of simple logical steps, moronic to you but excruciatingly complex to a beginner. Besides, it is a very respected game since Descartes devised it about 400 years ago.

So, I point. This is a poem:

She walks in beauty, like the night
    Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
    Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light
    Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
    Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
    Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
    How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
    So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
    But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
    A heart whose love is innocent.

That this is a poem, no one would deny. But what makes it a poem? Further, is it a very good poem? Read aloud to the students, even analyzed to its bare molecules, will your reading and expert explication tell them anything about the nature of poem *qua* poem (to use the jargon of the quintessential critics)? I doubt it. The reading aloud helps somewhat, for at least the sounds of the words are heard, especially the rhymes (how they do love rhyme!), and this is no mean accomplishment. But explain the sound system to them? To do so adequately requires a course in acoustical engineering and/or highly specialized phonetics, and these particular specialities, I would warrant, are the achievements of relatively few English teachers.

At any rate, here are two lines (one sentence) of Byron's poem:

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;

The first step in programming the teaching of a poem should be to change I. A. Richards' approach, *How To Read a Page*, into "How to read the opening lines." Assuming a knowledge of the alphabet (a huge assumption) and some acquaintance with the fact that the letters *s h e* equal the sound /šiy/ which in turn "stands for" or "refers to" a very ambiguous object not present but of the female gender, one proceeds to pointing to the most important word in the sentence, *walks*. It is more important than *she* because it is the function of *she*, and that is what the poet is describing. Next we will posit the notion of a modulus, that which remains constant though everything else changes. (It is best understood in the sense of the number 12 being a constant in the telling of time.) Then in answering the question how does she walk, the poet answers in terms of the modulus: "in beauty, like the night / Of cloudless climes and starry skies." The next logical step is to try to account for the fixed meaning of this constant since it will recur again and again as background to the many variable meanings in the rest of the poem.

But when confronted with a word like *beauty*, possibly the most abstract and elusive word in the language, the lexicographer and the reader throw up their hands. In such cases, the wisest decision one can make is to apply the word in its widest possible sense,[1] adding that perhaps one of its minimal meanings

is archetypal. However, even with such little help as this, can Byron's fixed meaning be further explored? It can. Beauty to him is caught in the simile "like the night / Of cloudless climes and starry skies." But what does this mean? It means that term A (beauty) does not equal but is equivalent to term B (one particular full-of-stars-and-devoid-of-clouds-night sky).[2] In other words, a univocal term with equivocal connotations translates to an icon of, or sense meaning of, the color white against a background of black. With this nucleus or core meaning established, Byron then proceeds to associate more and more electron-clusters of meanings and associations. Then he begins to write the rest of his poem.

It has been my experience that students best learn poetry by doing. (Even Orpheus, inspired though he was, had to learn all the do's and don't's of lyre playing before he went down to play.) Not that I expect to uncover any mute inglorious Miltons. My only aim — and this I think most creative writing courses do achieve — is to teach them to be better readers. Though Byron's poem is relatively simple, I would estimate that over half of those who come to it for the first time badly misread it.

But suppose they never do get to read it? Just suppose, for the purposes of our game, that they only see a punched-out version of the poem. Suppose the poem looked like this:

She _____s in beauty, like the _____
Of ____less ____s and ____ ____s;
And all that's ____ of ____ and bright
_____ in her ____ and her eyes:
Thus ____ed to that ____er ____
Which _____ to ____ ____ denies.

One ____ the ____, one ____ the ____,
____d _____ ____ed the ____less grace
Which _____ in every ____ tress
Or ____ly ____s o'er her _____;

Where _____ _____ly _____ express
How ____, how ____ their ____ing-place.

And on ____ ____, and o'er ____ ____,
So _____, so _____, yet eloquent,
The ____s that _____, the ____s that glow,
But _____of ____s in ____ness _____,
A _____ at _____ with all below,
A _____ whose _____ is innocent.

Call this what you will: the Cloze procedure developed by gestaltists, Shannon's guessing game, or *Escuche y Acierte!*, *Hor Zu und Rat mit!*, *Ecoutez et Devinez!*,[3] or a combination of all these methods. The name doesn't matter. The game, when played well, works.

For playing this game, these are the rules:

Given: All supplied words that are clues to better choice among probabilities. For example, any determinant like *the* and *a* predicts the certainty that the word going with it must be a nominal. The *s* morphs in the blanks are to be preceded by either verbs in the 3rd singular or nouns plural. The affixes *less* and *ness* have meanings to be found in the dictionary. The prepositions *in, o'er, on, at* answer the question *where* and are therefore locatives. The *ly* morph always means adverb, the *d* or *ed*, past tense, *ing*, gerund, etc.

Rule 1: The player must come as close as possible to the answer, Byron's complete poem, which is never shown to him until the poem is handed back or time is called.

Rule 2: The most important rule is that the choice of the "like operator" must be carried throughout the poem either as prominent foreground or as distant background. This operator can be thought of as the penumbra of the real, shadows, complementarities, or, to those with some knowledge of symbolic logic, as the null element (unit or identity). (In the case of this

lyric, perhaps it would be less restrictive if the simile *night* were actually supplied.)

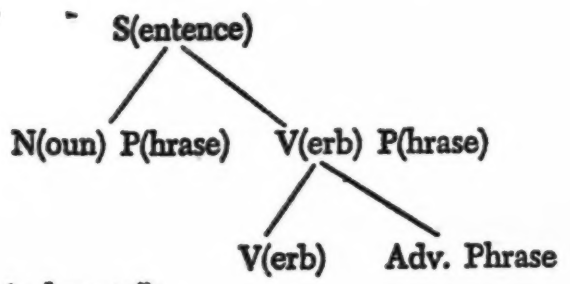
Rule 3: The rhyme scheme must be: a b a b a b. To make it less difficult to guess, two rhyme words in each stanza are given.

Rule 4: The metrical pattern must be i^4. Before the game is played it is always wise to give some instruction on basic English stress patterns in prose, then in verse, to distinguish the heard difference in alternating very strong stress with very weak stress. It is instructive to point out the violation of this natural stress pattern in poets like Longfellow.

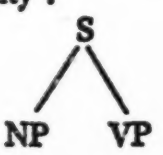
Rule 5: The meanings of certain fixed constants are understood. In logic these are *and* and *or*, and they always mean *inclusion* ("merging") for the former, *exclusion* ("discreteness") for the latter. Sometimes these words mean these things in ordinary English; sometimes they do not. Here in Byron's poem, for instance, "climes and starry skies," "dark and bright," "aspect and her eyes," in the first stanza do mean "merge." But *And* as conjunction in line 3, stanza 1, and in line 1, stanza 3, has nearly the same meaning as *Or* in line 4, stanza 2. These logical constants,[4] since they are the keys to syntax, must be carefully distinguished in every poem. In playing the game the players must be constantly on guard to detect their shifting functions.

Now in every game there is a trick, a way out of the perplexity, a strategic move enabling the better player to win. I think one of the best ways to "beat the poet" at his own game is to find the secret of his recursiveness. There is no better way to finding this secret than having a knowledge of the newest theory about grammar, transformational or generative grammar. One of its great potentials is the possible evolvement of the game which I call "the poem-paradigm game."

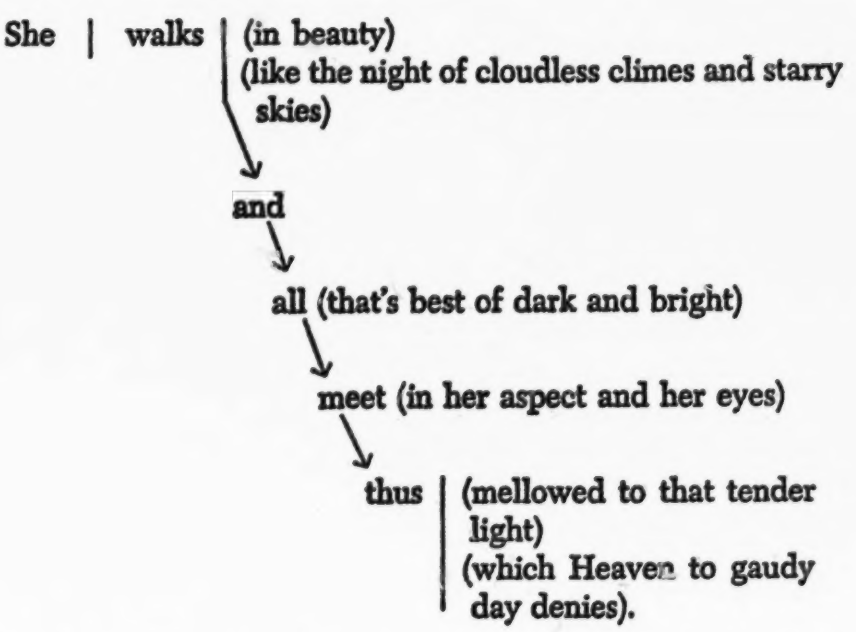
A poem-paradigm uses little more than traditional sentence outlining or parsing. It looks like a tree with branches springing from the nodes and shows strong divergence (an IC cut) at the fork of the tree. It pictures the graftings of the various subparts in an interrelated system. For a simple sentence (without ambiguity) that has a subject, intransitive verb, and adverbial phrase the diagram would look like this:



Hence "She walks in beauty":



But in Byron's poem "in beauty" is further modified by the adverbial "like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies." (Additional elements in a sentence are perhaps better understood by using the transformational terminology "concatenation.") This provides an important clue to the author's descriptive ways. That there is only one element on the left side (a noun)[5] and many elements on the right shows plainly that Byron is interested in manner. Once we understand the whole structure of the first stanza this statement can't be doubted:


She | walks | (in beauty)
(like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies)
and
all (that's best of dark and bright)
meet (in her aspect and her eyes)
thus | (mellowed to that tender light)
(which Heaven to gaudy day denies).

Now the *and* here translates as *and consequently*. When it is so

translated it becomes apparent that what Byron wanted to include in his schemata is: "She walks so that all (of the best) meet thus." The adverbials are options and could or could not be included in the description. He chose to include them. And interestingly enough, the last line in the stanza, "Which Heaven to gaudy day denies," is not adverbial. It is a separate sentence (really an adjective clause) that acts almost as an afterthought. It contrasts effectively in both function and meaning.

The advantage of thus showing the interrelatedness of the parts is that one quickly grasps the one-sidedness of choice of one part of speech over others. This would constitute the grammatical strategy of the author, and knowledge of this strategy helps decisively in deciphering the poem's meaning. Here the act of walking is described as a manner. That manner is first considered as a possible merging of "night-day" (an oxymoron) and then, in an abrupt relative clause, the possible merging of "day-night." Hence the consideration of night and its color companion, plus day and its color companion becomes the fulcra on which everything in the poem turns. I think that any beginning student of poetry who has had some exposure to sentence outlining should appreciate its use in helping him to read. He defiantly looks at you and says, "Show me!" Well, show him.

I have by no means exhausted the number and variety of games that can be played with poetry. But three of them: (1) the semantico-dictionary or word-cross game; (2) the punched-out poem game; and (3) the poem-paradigm game, I believe I have described adequately. Whether they are useful tools I leave to verifiability in that happiest of laboratories, the classroom.

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[1] Cf. Martin Joos's "principle of maximum redundancy" in his review of Eric Hamp's *A Glossary of American Technical Linguistic Usage, Language*, XXXIV (1958), p. 286.

[2] In metaphor, $A \pm B$; $A \equiv B$.

[3] Those charming books using the language-game theory published as a series by McGraw-Hill.

[4] "Topic neutrals," Gilbert Ryle calls them in his Tarner Lectures. *Dilemmas* (Cambridge, 1960), p. 120.

[5] I term *she* a noun because, according to combinatory logic, a variable that acts as an index of cross-referencing is ultimately eliminable in favor of a constant that designates a function of a function or a relation of a relation.

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